

Freeway could force Foothills church to move

by **Colleen Sparks** - Nov. 19, 2008 06:53 AM
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An Ahwatukee Foothills church that draws 1,200 on an average weekend would be pushed out if the proposed South Mountain Freeway were built.

Mountain Park Community Church moved to its scenic campus on Pecos Road near 24th Street 10 years ago. The church formed in 1987, meeting at two area schools.

Staff and members said they would hate to see the congregation, home of Christian yoga and numerous other adult and youth ministries, move from its hilly site in Ahwatukee.

"Our absolute preference is to keep the location and the building that we love," Mountain Park Senior Pastor Allan Fuller, an Ahwatukee resident, said. "I have both professional and personal reasons that I'm very much against building (the freeway)."

Not knowing when and if the freeway will be built makes it hard to plan expansion projects, though the church continues to move forward with minor improvements and hired a family pastor recently, Fuller said.

The freeway has been discussed for more than 20 years and funds for it became available when voters approved a half-cent sales tax in 2004. ADOT and the Federal Highway Administration will issue a record of decision on building the freeway, perhaps as early as next year. The Maricopa Association of Governments ultimately will decide whether to fund it.

There is no formal church stance on the freeway, Fuller said.

"We are interested in people's hearts and we don't go the political route," he said.

The Arizona Department of Transportation owns land on the northwestern corner of Interstate 10 and Pecos Road that it could swap with the church if the freeway were built along its proposed route, Fuller said.

Some church members said they'd just wait and see what happens.

"I've appreciated the delays," said Elena Porter, a member since 1987 and yoga ministry leader, who lives next to the proposed freeway. "When we first got the (church) land it was a pure miracle."

An anonymous couple sold the land, appraised at \$1.3 million, to the church for \$500,000 and used the proceeds to start an orphanage in Haiti.

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Mountain Park knew the freeway was a possibility but thought it was a built on a "good location" and whatever happened was "in God's hands," church administrator Dave Swisher said.

Swisher has attended meetings of the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team, which will recommend whether the freeway should be built.

Lisa Gomez, a member since 1987, helped paint the church and loves the campus. But she said parishioners could make new memories elsewhere.

"When we purchased the land it was under the notion that God could call us to move at any time," she said. "The actual move wouldn't be that big of a deal to me."

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